**We Warned You.**

I didn't meet up with Peter Seymour with intentions to spill my guts, but guilt has a way of coming out, even if the truth has to claw itself out of you. The truth is, my guilt only lasted a few weekends before I cracked, but of course, visiting Oran's Tavern every Saturday inevitably leads one down that road. In my adult life, I learned that, with enough rum or tequila, the truth has a way of showing itself, all without the uglier Guilt ever having to leave its cesspool. Why—with just a few late night beers, the words "I killed my only son" slips out as easily as, "did you catch the game last night?"

Peter set down his drink and checked the bar menu to give his hands something to do.

"What did you mean by that," Peter asked.

"Well, I don't really know how else to put it."

I let the rest of the beer run down my throat, then smacked down my share of the check. My mouth is prone to spills when I'm not paying too much attention. I kept quiet and walked out before I had the chance to give up the rest of my freedom to an equally sick son-of-a-bitch like Peter. I only spoke to him in passing, and more frequently, when Oran's Tavern cleared out. No one there but the town fuck-up Peter Seymour, a spaced-out bartender, and me. What wonderful company. Peter and I were friends in the way I befriended the roaches in my apartment's hallway. I left the tavern, confident that nothing I said would come of anything. Old Peter Seymour's Etch-a-Sketch brain could barely remember his name anymore.

While walking me down from the tavern to Market Street, Peter uncharacteristically stayed quiet the whole walk (I should be so lucky). Peter walked with a limp that came with a story of vague combat. This was a story that changed depending on what poor fuck got stuck talking to a leech like Peter. He told me it happened as a Marine during the Gulf, my cousin got a long winded tale about being incognito in Panama. No one's ever seen Peter Seymour leave Pennsylvania in fifty years. He wouldn't know New Jersey from ancient Egypt if you spun him around enough times. Finally, as we approached the City Square and Peter's train reared towards its station, he finally turned to me, almost stumbling.

"Didn't know you dated, Goldman," he said.

"Excuse me?"

"Well, what's your boy's name? Never took you much as a family man."

"Of course I am."

"Sure you are," he shot back. "Well?"

"Well, what?"

“Well, what’s the dead brat’s name?”

Peter's Etch-a-Sketch brain must’ve reset, because after a brief stare-down, he simply turned around and limped up the station steps before I could respond. I stood there in an empty town hall for something short of an eternity. In some miraculous way, the name of the boy whose life I took all but cleared itself from my head. I held my stomach in my greasy hands as I retched onto my feet.

I checked my phone, figuring out which rideshare service would eat up less of my bank account. I stared into my own reflection and became completely lost in myself.

“Who did I kill?”

My son smiled at everything everyone did. Even though it was just him and me, he always looked at a side of the world that I couldn’t bear to look at. Always with his red hoodie covering his curls, the same jacket he never took off, even if I beat it off of him.

Bright kid.

It bothered the hell out of me.

Anytime I came home from work a little worse for wear, I’d have to keep quiet the rest of the night in order to keep my sanity, and everytime the child would notice my change in mood, he stared at me and would say, “Don’t worry, Dad. Tomorrow’s a better day.” I would glare knives into his eyes until the little shit disappeared. Most of the time, it worked. I wouldn’t even know where he went—there wasn’t much to hide in a one bedroom apartment—but most of the time, he made a game out of it.

“Okay Dad, count to ten and then come find me.”

He wouldn’t leave until I finally acknowledged him.

“Just come find me, okay? Please?”

I wouldn’t dare look back at my son, but always gave a facetious, “You got it, champ.”

Most of the time, I forgot all about him. “Let the boy stay hidden,” I figured. Wherever he was, he wouldn’t leave until I saw him the next afternoon. I’d come home from work and the whole cycle continued. Never once did he so much as frown at me. I’m sure my son knew I was being intentional in my ignorance. He was too bright to not see the vacant pain I shot back like steak knives. Still, he never once let it bother the smile plastered on his face.

He mocked me. Every night, he mocked me. Until I made him disappear. I killed him and he disappeared. My son never came back.

When I looked up from my phone, I was staring down the barrel of a pistol.

"Wallet. Phone. Now!"

Those beers ran through my veins and forced the phone from my hands. It hit the cement and spun like a coin towards the gunman's boot, the map of a rideshare app looking back at me, laughing. I gave that man everything as best as I could and said nothing. My stomach boiled with so much alcohol, I don't even think I could.

I sat there beside myself, no phone and no wallet, ready to make the long walk back home. I barely knew where I was, but comforted myself with the logic that, if I followed the train tracks, it would point me in the right direction eventually.

It didn't take long for my feet to find a neighborhood it recognized, but it wasn't my own, or not my current anyway. The houses stretched all the way back into a younger part of myself who smiled more and drank less.

"Over there!" I yelled. "That's where the comic shop used to be, and back that way, during the summers, the hydrant practically broke open every year."

The alcohol pushed me into the street, overwhelmed, and maybe jealous, at my giddy nostalgia. I think deep down, it knows we'll never have what my childhood and I had. I helped myself off the ground and looked up as I felt something pulling at me.

"Goldman? Ethan Goldman?"

A tiny voice brought my head down to my shoulders. I panicked at the name she whispered, but when I saw who it was, I eased up.

"Do you remember me? Nancy, Nancy Wells? We're neighbors, or…" she shook her head and corrected herself. "At least we used to be, but that was a lifetime ago. Lord, doesn't it feel like it, Ethan?"

*Ethan.* I thought back to Peter Seymour, and his question I couldn't seem to answer, and just like that, the oxygen became light and fluffy, as if it were made of sugar.

"Nancy Wells, of course! It certainly has been. How has that second life treated you?" I shook her hand the way a crook would shake on a shit deal. The beer and rum cleared up, and replaced itself with a splitting migraine.

"Oh, adulthood has its perks. I was just heading to work; I have an early shift." She studied my appearance and I spoke with clenched teeth so she couldn't smell me. "How's adulthood been for you, Ethan?"

Everytime she spoke that name, the pins in my head would stab deeper. I waited for it to go away before I responded. "Welp, just about the same. I just got off a late shift." I imagined Peter running behind me, calling me out.

"Interesting hours, got any children? I have three myself. Always a handful, they are."

"I have a son actually." I searched again for a name. It didn't fit completely, but it had to be. "His name is Ethan."

"Oh, how sweet. So he's a junior."

"Excuse me?"

"Well if your name's Ethan, and you named him after you, then…" She made a rolling motion with her hand. There was an empty beat before she spoke again. "Well anyway, it must be nice to have a boy. I have three girls myself." She searched for the keys in her purse as I followed her to her car.

"I wonder how much he takes from you?"

"Everything," I spat.

"Oh that's wonderful," she said, missing my ugly, drunken tone. "I remember you being the sweetest little thing, that lifetime ago." Her car door swung open and a gust of wind hit me in the chest. She hesitated before climbing in. "I remember, everytime Mr. Weller yelled at us for opening the hydrant—really *anytime* we were chased—you'd always say, 'Nance, tomorrow's a better day!' How you knew it was beyond me, but I'll be damned if you weren't always right."

My feet started my body down the street, just slowly and on its own. My heart sped up and all the air in my old neighborhood disappeared. My body reacted like I'd just been shot.

"Always smiling, you were, even if it drove your old man up the wall, god bless his soul."

"What?" I asked.

"I can still hear the ambulances scream down the street, and even when I saw your mother take you away for the last time, you still had that same smile on your face… and that ugly red hoodie, we could never get you to take it off." Nancy laughed as she finally sat into the driver's seat and turned the ignition. I turned around only once and saw that she was frowning in her car. "I just hope adulthood was kinder to you than childhood was."

"I hope so too," I said, then cringed, realizing it made no sense.

I turned back and made some distance from Nancy Wells's car. I made it all the way to the end of the block by the time her car caught up to me. She stopped next to me and spoke to me one final time.

“Hey Ethan, I’m really sorry about what happened, but hey! I’m at least proud you’ve seemed to keep your family close, even if it’s new and still young to this ugly city. Say hi to Junior for me.”

I rested my hand on her car and braved the best smile I could muster. “Of course I will!”

“Maybe we could all plan something together. I know I’d like to get my girls out of the house. They swarm me like moths,” she laughed. “But that's part of being a parent, right Ethan? They could be adults, and you’ll never get rid of them.”

“Of course not,” I said. All the braveness peeled itself off my bones. I was a coward.

“You know where to find me. Same house, after all these years.” she forced an awkward laugh and drove off. “Get home safe, Ethan”

“Ethan.” I said the name again, now confident that it didn’t fit. What was it?

I walked a few more blocks in my old neighborhood until my childhood nostalgia ran dry and I became, once again, lost. Stumbling from block to block with no real direction. I’m not even sure I was still in the city anymore. Cold and sobering up, I wasn’t sure I’d ever find my way back. I wasn’t sure I wanted to find it.

The sun rose over an unfamiliar skyline as I repeated the same question in my head until it hurt.

“Who did I kill?”